

II. SCANDINAVIAN CRIME FICTION AS AN ELEMENT OF LITERARY DISCOURSE

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Streszczenie

Autor tekstu podejmuje problematykę dyskursu literackiego jako dynamicznego przecięcia języka, ideologii i kultury, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem skandynawskiej powieści kryminalnej oraz *Trylogii z Oslo* Jo Nesbø. Dyskurs literacki rozumiany jest nie tylko jako użycie języka, lecz także jako praktyka zakorzeniona w kontekstach społecznych, historycznych i medialnych. W odróżnieniu od tradycji formalistycznych i strukturalistycznych, współczesne podejścia – inspirowane poststrukturalizmem, studiami kulturowymi i teorią mediów – akcentują intertekstualność, dialogiczność oraz rolę dyskursu w kształtowaniu i kwestionowaniu struktur władzy. Literatura jawi się tym samym jako praktyka kulturowa, która nie tylko odzwierciedla rzeczywistość, ale również w nią interweniuje, podejmując kwestie tożsamości, moralności i ideologii.

W tym ujęciu skandynawska powieść kryminalna, określana mianem nordic noir, stanowi wyrazisty przykład funkcjonowania literatury jako dyskursu. Wyrosła z tradycji społecznie zaangażowanej prozy Maj Sjöwall i Pera Wahlöö, łączy konwencje narracji kryminalnej z krytyką społeczną, podejmując tematy korupcji instytucjonalnej, globalizacji, nacjonalizmu czy przemocy ze względu na płeć. Jej mroczne scenerie, moralnie ambiwalentni detektywi oraz alegoryczne przestrzenie tworzą formę, która pełni zarówno funkcję popularnej rozrywki, jak i komentarza kulturowego, poddając refleksji kruchość ideałów państwa opiekuńczego oraz napięcia nowoczesności.

Trylogia z Oslo Nesbø („Czerwone gardło”, „Trzeci klucz”, „Pentagram”) ukazuje, jak literatura gatunkowa realizuje funkcję dyskursywną. Postać Harry’ego Hole, detektywa naznaczonego egzystencjalnym kryzysem i moralną niejednoznacznością, pozwala autorowi splatać wątki kryminalne z refleksją nad historią, etyką i władzą. Powieści te konfrontują nierozliczone aspekty norweskiej przeszłości, trwałość ekstremizmów, systemową korupcję oraz kruchość wymiaru sprawiedliwości, a jednocześnie wpisują się w tradycję amerykańskiego hardboiled fiction. Odczytane w perspektywie Michela Foucaulta, Julii Kristevej czy Pierre’a Bourdieu, powieści kryminalne Nesbø ukazują, jak literatura popularna staje się przestrzenią negocjacji ideologii, pamięci i tożsamości. Ostatecznie literatura jawi się tu nie jako autonomiczny artefakt estetyczny, lecz jako żywy dyskurs, jako arena, w której narracja, kultura i społeczeństwo spotykają się w procesie nieustannego wytwarzania znaczeń.

Summary

The chapter explores the concept of literary discourse as a dynamic intersection of language, ideology, and culture, with a particular focus on Scandinavian crime fiction and Jo Nesbø’s *Oslo Trilogy*. Literary discourse is understood not simply as language in use but as a practice embedded in social, historical, and media contexts. Moving beyond formalist and structuralist traditions, contemporary approaches shaped by poststructuralism, cultural studies, and media theory emphasize intertextuality, dialogism, and the role of discourse in shaping

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and contesting power. Literature is thus positioned as a cultural practice that both reflects and intervenes in society, engaging with questions of identity, morality, and ideology.

Within this framework, Scandinavian crime fiction, often termed Nordic Noir, illustrates the discursive function of literature with particular clarity. Emerging from the socially engaged tradition of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, the genre combines crime narratives with social critique, foregrounding themes such as institutional corruption, globalization, nationalism, and gendered violence. Its bleak settings, morally ambiguous detectives, and allegorical landscapes allow it to function as both popular entertainment and cultural commentary, interrogating the fragility of welfare-state ideals and the pressures of global modernity.

Jo Nesbø's *Oslo Trilogy* (*The Redbreast*, *Nemesis*, *The Devil's Star*) exemplifies this dual role of crime fiction as genre and discourse. Through the figure of Harry Hole, a flawed and existentially burdened detective, Nesbø interweaves suspense with reflections on history, ethics, and power. The novels confront unresolved aspects of Norwegian history, the persistence of extremism, systemic corruption, and the instability of justice, while also drawing on American hardboiled traditions. Read through the lenses of Foucault, Kristeva, and Bourdieu, the trilogy demonstrates how popular fiction operates as a cultural site where ideology, memory, and identity are negotiated. Ultimately, literature emerges here not as an autonomous aesthetic object but as a living discourse, an arena where narrative, culture, and society intersect in the ongoing production of meaning.

1. Literary Discourse in Literary Studies

The concept of *discourse* has long posed challenges for scholars attempting to provide a precise and universally accepted definition of the term. Despite its elusiveness, one of the most frequently cited and widely acknowledged definitions is offered by Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short in their work *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. They propose that:

Discourse is linguistic communication seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose (2007, p. 209).

This definition emphasizes the fundamentally interactive and socially situated nature of discourse, highlighting that meaning does not arise in isolation but is shaped by communicative purpose and context. In this sense, discourse may be broadly understood as language in use or, as Émile Benveniste succinctly phrased it, “language put into action” (qtd. in Marnette, 2005, p. 7). Both perspectives foreground the pragmatic dimension of discourse, underscoring its dependence on the relational dynamics between interlocutors and the functions it serves within social interaction, confirming thus that, as noted by J. A. Cuddon, discourse is

Language which is understood as utterance and thus involves subjects who speak and write – which presupposes listeners and readers who, in a sense, are ‘objects’. Discourse has an object and is directed to or at an object. Thus, in theory at any rate, discourse might include any modes of utterance as a part of social practice. They are differentiated by their intention. Thus, discourse may be poetry or prose. It may be a poem,

a philosophical essay, a political tract, a biblical commentary, a speech on the hustings, a funeral address, a polemic, a dialogue or an exercise in deconstructive criticism. It may be a number of things (1999, p. 228).

Within the field of linguistics, however, discourse is often approached through a more textually oriented lens. As Sara Mills notes, drawing upon the foundational contributions of theorists such as Sinclair, Coulthard, Carter, and Simpson, the term commonly “implies a concern with the analysis of the text above the level of the utterance or sentence; thus, discourse is an extended piece of text, which has some form of internal organisation, coherence or cohesion” (2004, p. 8). This definition expands the focus of linguistic inquiry beyond the boundaries of isolated utterances to examine larger units of meaning, thereby recognizing discourse as a structured whole rather than a mere sequence of sentences. Importantly, Mills further contends that discourse cannot be adequately understood without reference to its situational context, asserting that “discourse is defined by the context of occurrence of certain utterances” (2004, p. 8). This perspective reinforces the dual orientation of discourse studies: on the one hand, toward the structural and organizational properties of language, and on the other, toward the social, cultural, and pragmatic conditions in which communicative acts are embedded. Taken together, these definitions suggest that discourse is best conceptualized as both a linguistic and social phenomenon, simultaneously a patterned, coherent use of language and an act of communication situated within specific contexts of meaning-making.

Such an understanding of discourse has profound implications for literary studies, particularly in relation to the shift away from earlier critical paradigms. Contemporary literary scholarship increasingly departs from approaches that regarded literature as a self-contained and autonomous entity, analyzable exclusively in terms of its formal and aesthetic properties. Traditional frameworks such as Russian Formalism and Structuralism prioritized the internal organization of texts, attending to linguistic features, compositional patterns, and semiotic structures, while often overlooking the broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks in which literature is embedded. As David Greenwood has noted,

[T]he formalists were ultimately concerned with the way in which the individual text (or *parole*) was perceived differentially against the background of the literary system as a whole (or *langue*) (1985, p. 110).

This formulation reflects the formalist conviction that literary meaning arises primarily from the interplay of textual elements within a self-regulating system rather than from engagement with external conditions.

By contrast, the discourse-oriented approach foregrounds precisely those external conditions—the situational, cultural, and ideological contexts—that formalist methodologies bracketed or excluded. If formalism sought to isolate the literary work within an autonomous system of signs, discourse theory insists upon its embeddedness within broader communicative and social practices. In this way, the study of discourse provides a conceptual bridge between linguistic analysis and socio-cultural critique, enabling contemporary literary scholarship to situate texts not only as internally

organized structures but also as dynamic interventions within historically and ideologically charged discursive fields.

With the subsequent emergence of poststructuralist, cultural, and intermedial theories, however, the limitations of such insular models became increasingly apparent. Literary studies have gradually shifted toward conceptions of literature as a dynamic and relational phenomenon, one that cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the discursive, institutional, and material environments in which it circulates. In this view, literature ceases to be a closed and self-sufficient object of analysis and instead appears as a form of discourse perceived as an ongoing cultural practice wherein linguistic, social, ideological, political, and institutional dimensions intersect.

This shift is particularly indebted to Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault insists that discourse should not be conceived merely as a transparent medium for transmitting preexisting ideas or representations, but rather as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs, and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (qtd. in Lessa, 2006, p. 284). In this sense, literature does not passively mirror reality; it actively participates in its construction by shaping the categories, values, and narratives through which human experience becomes intelligible. From this perspective, contemporary literary analysis is less concerned with identifying the intrinsic formal properties of a text than with exploring the dialogical relationships between literature and the social world. The text is understood as an active node within broader networks of cultural production, dissemination, and reception. Consequently, questions of power, ideology, identity, and institutional authority assume central importance, as literature is increasingly recognized not only as a reflection of cultural dynamics but as one of their constitutive forces.

The notion of *literary discourse* has consequently emerged as a central analytical category, allowing scholars to conceptualize literature not merely as an aesthetic artifact but as an active process of producing meanings, values, and cultural imaginaries. Within this framework, literature is understood as a site of interaction where textual practices and socio-historical conditions converge to generate significance. Julia Kristeva, for instance, has emphasized the interdependent and dialogical nature of textual production, observing that "every text is a mosaic of quotations," and that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986, p. 34). By this, she underscores the principle that no literary text exists in isolation; rather, each literary work is enmeshed in a web of textual relations and a literary discourse that extend across literary traditions, cultural practices, and ideological discourses. Kristeva's influential concept of intertextuality has a direct antecedent in Roland Barthes's theorization of the text as a citational tissue. In his *Image–Music–Text*, Barthes argues that:

The intertextuality in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are

anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas (1977, p. 160).

Barthes's formulation displaces the traditional quest for origins and influences, reframing the literary text as an open constellation of prior discourses whose traces remain operative yet unlocatable. This re-conceptualization destabilizes the notion of the text as a bounded or proprietary artifact and repositions it as a node within an intertextual network that perpetually exceeds the boundaries of the individual work. In this way, literature can be re-imagined as a space of exchange, an arena in which ideological struggles are articulated and contested, and through which dynamics of power, exclusion, emancipation, and resistance become legible. Such an approach foregrounds the productive rather than reflective capacity of literature: texts not only register cultural tensions but also participate in their negotiation and transformation.

It is important to note, however, that mid-20th-century structuralism initially resisted such relational and contextual accounts. Structuralist theorists, following the linguistic models of Ferdinand de Saussure, approached literature as a system of signs that derived meaning only through differential relations within the textual structure itself. As Roland Barthes remarked, the literary system could be described as "a structure in which nothing has meaning except in relation to other elements" (as cited in Papaport, 2011, p. 77). From this perspective, the literary text appeared as a self-contained whole, a closed network of signs governed by internal rules and oppositions. Yet over time, the limitations of structuralism became increasingly apparent. By bracketing the historical and cultural dimensions of literary production and reception, structuralist models risked reducing texts to static systems of internal relations. The emergence of poststructuralist and cultural theories thus marked a decisive shift, redirecting attention to the dynamic interplay between text and context, and to the ways in which literature functions as discourse within wider fields of power, ideology, and cultural production.

Poststructuralism, in contrast to the formalist and structuralist paradigms that preceded it, shifts attention away from the search for stable structures and emphasizes instead the relational and very often unstable nature of meaning. Julia Kristeva, as previously noted, insists that no text exists in isolation but is always produced through dialogue with other texts, traditions, and discourses. This principle of intertextuality undermines the notion of literary autonomy by foregrounding the constitutive relationality of textual meaning. A similar orientation is evident in Jacques Derrida's reflections in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida challenges any reductive conception of textuality as confined to written language or symbolic representation, asserting:

I wanted to recall that the concept of a text I propose is limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic, representational, symbolic, ideal, or ideological sphere. What I call 'text' implies all the structures called 'real', 'economic', 'historical', 'socio-institutional', in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text' (qtd. in Gaston, 2011, xxii).

Derrida's provocative claim that "there is nothing outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) does not suggest that reality is reducible to writing in a narrow sense, but rather that meaning is always mediated by systems of signification and is therefore never fully fixed or transparent. Textuality, in this sense, denotes an open-ended process of the continual deferral and differentiation of meaning through which all discourses, including economic, historical, and institutional ones, must be read. Within this framework, literature ceases to be conceived as a stable or self-contained object and instead emerges as a cultural practice embedded within, and constitutive of, broader ideological, social, and political networks. The emphasis shifts from literature as a closed structure to literature as an active site of negotiation, contestation, and transformation.

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism further illuminates this perspective on literary discourse, while also revealing its complex theoretical genealogy. Although Bakhtin is most frequently associated with poststructuralist and postmodern thought, his work is deeply indebted to structuralist approaches, particularly in its systematic concern with language, form, and the organization of meaning. His early engagement with linguistics and formal analysis situates his theories within a broader structuralist framework that sought to uncover the underlying principles governing signification. At the same time, Bakhtin departs from rigid structuralism by emphasizing the dynamic, social, and historical dimensions of language. For Bakhtin(1984), the word lives only in dialogue, in interaction with another's word, meaning that every utterance is shaped by, and oriented toward, other voices within a structured yet evolving linguistic system. Language, while possessing formal and structural properties, is never static or self-contained; rather, it is constantly refracted through social interaction and ideological struggle. Accordingly, a literary text cannot be reduced to a monologic expression governed solely by internal structures, but must instead be understood as a polyphonic arena in which diverse worldviews, ideological positions, and cultural forces intersect, overlap, and clash.

By integrating structuralist attention to form with an emphasis on dialogic interaction, Bakhtin reconceptualizes literary discourse as both systemically organized and fundamentally open. In this sense, his work functions as a crucial bridge between structuralism and poststructuralism. Poststructuralist thought builds upon this foundation by further expanding the scope of literary theory, repositioning literature as a discursive practice that is relational, historically situated, and resistant to closure. Rather than offering a singular or final meaning, literature operates as a site of multiplicity, in which meaning is continually produced and renegotiated through intertextual, social, and ideological dialogues.

Additionally, Michel Foucault's re-conceptualization of discourse emphasizes that discourse is never a neutral medium for representing reality but is itself implicated in the operations of power and domination. As Foucault argues, "discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle" (1981, pp. 52–53). In other words, discourse is not merely reflective of social conflicts; it constitutes the very terrain upon which such conflicts are waged. Sara Mills elaborates on this Foucauldian perspective by stressing that discourse must be understood simultaneously as a site of struggle and as a mechanism through which subjectivity itself is constituted:

[Discourse] becomes not simply a grouping of written texts within a particular discursive formation, but, at one and the same time, the site of struggles for meaning and also a means of constituting humans as individuals. That is, discourses are not anonymous sets of writing which have little effect on people's lives, but they actively constitute us as subjects (2003, p. 68).

From this vantage point, literature can no longer be conceived merely as an aesthetic object but must be situated within broader socio-political networks. Literary texts operate as part of a cultural field in which the boundaries of what may be said, thought, and represented are constantly negotiated and contested. They are inseparable from the ideological, political, and institutional structures that govern their production, circulation, and reception. As Foucault further observes, "the production of discourse is simultaneously controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers" (1981, p. 52). This observation acquires particular significance in the context of literature, whose dissemination and legitimacy depend upon publishing industries, systems of education, mechanisms of censorship, and media infrastructures. In this sense, literary discourse is best understood as a dynamic field of tension and a space in which presence and absence, meaning and indeterminacy, expression and silence continually intersect. Each act of reading participates in this process by generating new interpretive possibilities, none of which can claim to exhaust the text's potential. Literature thus appears not as a stable repository of fixed meanings but as an open site of discursive negotiation, where authors, readers, critics, and institutions converge in the ongoing production of significance.

Contemporary cultural theories have further expanded the scope of literary studies by foregrounding the concepts of *intermediality* and *mediality* in the analysis of literary discourse. These perspectives challenge the view of literature as a purely linguistic or textual phenomenon, insisting instead on its embeddedness within broader media ecologies. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, observes that literature has never been exclusively "literary" in a narrow sense; rather, it has always existed in conjunction with the media through which it is transmitted and preserved (2002). Her analysis underscores that literary texts are inseparable from the material carriers, technological platforms, and institutional frameworks that condition their production, circulation, and reception. This line of inquiry is further developed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their influential theory of *remediation*, which posits that every medium exists only in relation to other media, continually absorbing, refashioning, and referencing them (1999). Within this framework, literature itself emerges as an intermedial practice, one that perpetually negotiates its identity through interaction with visual, oral, digital, and performative modes. Marshall McLuhan's oft-cited dictum that "the medium is the message" (1994) provides a complementary perspective by insisting that content cannot be divorced from the technological form in which it appears. The materiality of inscription, whether parchment, print, broadcast, or digital code, profoundly shapes not only the modes of literary expression but also the ways in which texts are read, interpreted, and culturally valued. Taken together,

these approaches reveal that literary discourse is not solely linguistic but is always already social, medial, and technological. Literature must therefore be understood as a complex cultural practice that traverses multiple media environments, adapting to and transforming the conditions of its transmission. In this light, the study of literature becomes inseparable from the study of media history, technological innovation, and the institutional infrastructures that mediate the circulation of meaning.

Hence, the concept of *literary discourse* is best understood as expansive, dynamic, and interdisciplinary. It extends beyond the boundaries of the text itself to include its social functions, institutional frameworks, ideological contexts, and medial environments. Literature is no longer approached as a closed aesthetic object, autonomous from historical reality, but rather as a living cultural process that both reflects and co-produces meaning, undergoing constant transformation in response to shifting social, political, and technological conditions. Jürgen Habermas has emphasized that communicative practices, in order to be meaningful and effective, must remain rooted in the *lifeworld* (1984). By analogy, literature as discourse derives its force not from isolation but from its embeddedness within the social world. Only by engaging with concrete cultural and historical realities can literature sustain its impact and participate in the ongoing processes of meaning-making.

Contemporary literary studies, having moved decisively beyond the limitations of formalist and structuralist paradigms, thus approach literature as a multifaceted practice, cultural, ideological, political, medial, and technological. Within this framework, literary discourse functions as a tool for analyzing not only the complexities of the text but also its entanglement with broader social and cultural processes. Literature does not merely mirror reality; it actively intervenes in and shapes it, serving as a critical site in the ongoing struggle over meaning, values, identity, and visions of community. Accordingly, literary discourse must be conceived as a field of negotiation, dialogue, and contestation in which diverse voices, ideologies, and perspectives intersect. The study of such discourse demands an interdisciplinary approach that draws on hermeneutics, critical theory, the sociology of literature, cultural anthropology, media theory, semiotics, and the philosophy of language. Only by integrating these perspectives can we grasp literature as a dynamic cultural practice that co-produces the very frameworks through which we think, experience, and interpret the world.

2. Scandinavian Crime Fiction in the Context of Literary Discourse

Scandinavian crime fiction, commonly referred to as Nordic Noir, denotes a distinct and globally influential subgenre of crime fiction originating from the Nordic nations. Over the past few decades, this literary tradition has garnered significant international attention, not merely for its compelling narratives and stark atmospheres, but for its unique interweaving of detective fiction with pointed sociopolitical critique. Although, as observed by Sue Neale, “the genre is still dominated by Anglo-American writers, the shift has been evident, for example, in the degree to which translations [of the Scandinavian crime fiction novels] began to dominate the shortlists for awards” (2010, p. 296), Nordic Noir’s growing visibility marks its significance as a site of literary discourse where the interplay of narrative, ideology, and social critique is foregrounded.

As Glen Creeber aptly observes, while writing about Nordic Noir on television, the Scandinavian crime fiction is “typified by its heavy mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives” (2015, p. 21) and, as such, it is distinct from more traditional subgenres of crime fiction. As highlighted by Muždeka, it proves to be different in “that it explores, much more consistently and rigorously, a specific, geographically circumscribed, historical and cultural climate” (2022, p. 221). She adds that this “climate is characterized, in particular, by some of the premises shared by Scandinavian welfare states, that is, their assumptions about ethnic, social, and cultural homogeneity” (p. 221). Moreover, the genre’s hallmark is its sombre tone and emotional gravitas, frequently reflected through its protagonists’ psychological complexity and the hostile, often inhospitable physical environments in which their investigations unfold. Far from being formulaic or escapist, the Scandinavian crime fiction is deeply invested in the interrogation of contemporary social conditions, opening “space for the investigation of a wider social, cultural and political reality of Norwegian society through the range of topics that suit the authors’ socio-political agenda” (p. 222) and as such its specificity lies in “a crime narrative’s response to local, national and regional conditions [that are] frequently subsumed with ease into apparently ‘universal’ and ‘global’ issues”, as noted by Gudmundsdottir and Meaney (2022, p. 12). In consequence, the genre frequently functions as a mode of cultural diagnosis, examining the disintegration of welfare-state ideals, the erosion of communal trust, and the ethical crises brought about by neoliberal globalization. As Jacob Stougaard-Nielsen argues, one of the most striking characteristics of the form is the:

volatility of crime genre to respond to new and different pressures on individuals and collectives, to reflect the anxieties of a globalized age as it is absorbed into the specific geographic locations and generic traditions of a now much less stable Scandinavian imaginary (2017, p. 114).

This “volatility” is manifest in the genre’s capacity to oscillate between the local and the global, the procedural and the philosophical, the personal and the systemic. The protagonists that populate these narratives, often emotionally damaged, ethically conflicted, and socially marginal, exemplify the tensions of modern existence in societies that are both materially affluent and morally uncertain. Their introspective journeys frequently parallel the broader dissolution of stable identities, collective solidarities, and shared moral frameworks. As Stougaard-Nielsen further elaborates, the Scandinavian crime fiction from the 1990s onward reveals:

the rifts in the solid modernity of the welfare state [which] have become wide-open wounds that characterize, to use Bauman’s metaphors again, a ‘liquid modernity’, wherein social life is fundamentally conditioned by decomposed traditions, restless mobility and changeable communities made up of fluid, anxious identities. This next generation of crime novels, however, also expresses a persistent lament for a better, more solidaristic, more authentic, perhaps more sentimental society of

close and trusting relationships perceived to having been forgotten in the wake of modernization and globalization – though, importantly, such bygone values are often coded as inherent to particular national characteristics of the Scandinavian welfare states (2017, p. 116).

This sense of social fragmentation and cultural nostalgia is not merely thematic; it is embedded in the formal structures and narrative rhythms of the genre. Crime is often not merely a personal transgression but a symptom of broader institutional or societal dysfunction. The act of investigation itself becomes an allegory for both collective introspection and the interrogation of the human condition with special focus upon its dark, sinister, and sometimes brutal side. And, keeping that in mind, it is important to include here the quote by Patrick Raynal who proclaims that:

If we can broadly define noir writing and noir inspiration as a way of looking at the world, at the dark, opaque, criminals side of the world, shot through with the intense feelings of fatality we carry within us due to the fact that the only thing we can know for certain is that we will inevitably die, then it can indeed be said that *Oedipus Rex* was the first noir novel (qtd. by Gudmundsdottir and Meaney, 2022, p. 1).

Nevertheless, the ideological roots of the genre can be traced back to the pioneering Swedish duo Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, whose *Martin Beck* series, beginning with *Roseanna* in 1965, established a foundational template for socially engaged crime fiction. Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir and Gerardine Meaney in their introduction to *Noir in the North: Genre, Politics and Place* note that “Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö are usually considered to be the originators of a distinctively Scandinavian form of crime fiction that is rooted in Swedish politics and culture, and influenced by American hardboiled and noir” (2022, p. 5). Published under the joint title *The Story of a Crime*, their ten-novel cycle marked a significant departure from the traditional detective narrative. Writing from a Marxist perspective during a time of perceived social complacency in Sweden, Sjöwall and Wahlöö, who, as asserted by Sue Neale, “regarded their crime stories not as entertainment but as social criticism that sees crime as a reflection of the society in which it occurs” (2010, p. 299), used their crime novels as a vehicle to critique the myth of the egalitarian welfare state, constructing at the same time the detective who becomes “sceptical not just about the actual meaning of crime but also about the justification (with exceptions such as those extremely rare serial killers) for the pursuit of criminals” (Evans, 2009, p. 140). Nevertheless, their vision of crime was structural rather than individualistic, positioning it as a manifestation of political malaise and bureaucratic dehumanization, constructing that way, as highlighted by Richard Shephard:

an incisive and realistic portrait of 1960s Sweden. Although it was a country then deemed to be alluringly liberal and enticing, from the cool and measured perspective of Sjöwall and Wahlöö, Sweden was actually a stifling place, corroded by the mute desire of its populace to not rock the

boat, even if the vessel in question was leaky, directionless and, for some, ultimately hazardous (2006, p. 3).

Their legacy endures not only in the genre's political ambition but in its emphasis on institutional critique, flawed protagonists, and realism. Their objectives in writing such a form of socially-oriented fiction are as follows:

We wanted to describe society from our left point of view. Per had written political books, but they'd only sold 300 copies. We realised that people read crime and through the stories we could show the reader that under the official image of welfare-state Sweden there was another layer of poverty, criminality and brutality. We wanted to show where Sweden was heading: towards a capitalistic, cold and inhuman society, where the rich got richer, the poor got poorer (qtd. by Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir and Gerardine Meaney, p. 5).

Martin Priestman in his study entitled *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present* asserts that:

Following respectful receptions for the Swedish Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's Martin Beck series (from *Roseanna*, 1965) and the Danish Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992, translated 1996), the sense that a really significant deepening of the genre's range and potential was taking place in the north of Europe became widespread with the runaway popularity of the Swedish Henning Mankell's series featuring Kurt Wallander (2013, p. 72).

Henning Mankell's *Kurt Wallander* series, debuting with *Faceless Killers* (1991), extended and deepened this tradition by fusing political critique with psychological realism. Wallander, a fatigued and morally troubled detective, embodies the internalization of societal decline. Mankell's fiction, incorporating the portrayal of "the investigations [that] highlighted the fundamental virtue of the police: patience and represented murder investigators as ordinary human beings (qtd. by Neale, 2010, p. 299), foregrounds the contradictions of late modernity: increasing immigration and cultural heterogeneity, the resurgence of nationalist ideologies, and the disintegration of collective moral certainties. The narratives dramatize Sweden caught between historical idealism and contemporary anxiety. Importantly, Mankell bridges the gap between the explicitly political noir of the 1960s and the more introspective, character-driven narratives that typify contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction. His literary work, therefore, offers a melancholic critique of the present, revealing the cracks in the once-imagined seamless fabric of the welfare state.

It is worth noting that Scandinavian crime fiction's distinctiveness lies not only in its narratives and settings but also in its capacity to function as a site of literary discourse, where questions of morality, ideology, and social structure are explored with both subtlety and rigor. Its hybrid nature—interweaving elements of detective fiction, social realism, psychological exploration, and even political allegory—allows

it to transcend the conventional boundaries of genre fiction. This dimension of literary discourse is exemplified in the manner in which Scandinavian crime fiction interrogates structural and systemic phenomena, positioning crime not merely as an individual moral lapse but as a symptom of social malaise. In the literary works of such crime writers as Sjöwall and Wahlöö, Mankell, Nesbø, and Larsson, crime becomes a lens through which readers are invited to critically examine the fragility of welfare systems, the marginalization of minorities, gendered violence, and the disjunctions between law, justice, and morality. Gudmundsdottir and Meaney remark that these narratives often explore “a crime narrative’s response to local, national and regional conditions [that are] frequently subsumed with ease into apparently ‘universal’ and ‘global’ issues” (2022, p. 12), indicating the genre’s dual role as both a culturally situated and globally relevant discourse.

Significantly, Scandinavian crime fiction also positions the detective as a locus of discursive reflection, whose flawed humanity allows the genre to explore complex moral and existential questions. As Stougaard-Nielsen notes, the form “expresses a persistent lament for a better, more solidaristic, more authentic, perhaps more sentimental society” (2017, p. 116). By situating detectives such as Kurt Wallander, Harry Hole, and Lisbeth Salander in morally ambiguous and socially complex worlds, authors transform the procedural into the philosophical and sociological, enabling readers to engage with issues of identity, power, and systemic inequality. Patrick Raynal’s observation that Scandinavian crime fiction is “a way of looking at the world, at the dark, opaque, criminals side of the world, shot through with the intense feelings of fatality we carry within us...” (qtd. by Gudmundsdottir and Meaney, 2022, p. 1) underscores the genre’s orientation toward existential reflection, situating crime fiction within broader literary and humanistic concerns.

Scandinavian crime fiction’s formal innovations further reinforce its role within literary discourse. The interplay between landscape, narrative structure, and character psychology produces texts that are both aesthetically rigorous and ideologically charged. As Waade emphasizes, the genre’s appeal rests on a “triple premise” of crime, societal critique, and expressive landscape (2020, p. 38). The physical and emotional terrains of these novels operate as allegorical spaces, reflecting internal conflict, social fragmentation, and historical consciousness. In this sense, Scandinavian crime fiction participates in what Julia Kristeva describes as the intertextual dialogic, whereby each narrative resonates with preceding texts, cultural memory, and ongoing societal debates. Moreover, Scandinavian crime fiction functions as a literary platform for ethical deliberation. Hansen, Waade, and Nestingen emphasize that the genre consistently interrogates the moral and political dimensions of justice, accountability, and power. The narratives’ focus on relational complexity, domestic spaces, and interiority – as in the *Wallander* series, where “everything boiled down to conversations between Kurt and relatives of suspects or victims” (García-Mainar, 2020, p. 169) – foregrounds the subjective and communal aspects of crime, expanding the discourse beyond legalistic frameworks into ethical, psychological, and philosophical registers.

It is of importance to add that transnational dissemination of Scandinavian crime fiction has elevated its position as a global literary discourse, illustrating the permeability of local cultural production into international literary conversation.

Gregoriou's notion of a "crime fiction migration effect" (2017, p. 2) demonstrates how Scandinavian crime fiction narratives maintain ideological coherence while traversing cultural contexts. Similarly, Stougaard-Nielsen (2017) notes that the genre's international mobility reflects its adaptability in negotiating universal human concerns, from alienation and moral ambiguity to institutional critique. Through translations, adaptations, and academic engagement, Nordic Noir participates in ongoing literary dialogue, highlighting how genre fiction can occupy the same discursive terrain as canonical literary forms. The critical dimension of Scandinavian crime fiction can also be articulated through the lens of cultural theory and literary criticism. By depicting the tensions between social ideals and lived realities, authors such as Sjöwall and Wahlöö, Mankell, and Larsson construct literature perceived as a mechanism of power, representation, and social knowledge, foregrounding how crime, justice, and social institutions mediate public understanding of morality, fairness, and civic responsibility. It thus becomes a site where literature operates as both mirror and critique, engaging with real-world sociopolitical debates while advancing the aesthetic possibilities of narrative form.

Scandinavian crime fiction's integration of social critique, philosophical inquiry, and narrative innovation positions it as a paradigmatic example of literature functioning as discourse, mediating between individual experience, collective memory, and societal reflection. As Jakob Isak Nielsen (2016) observes, the genre's purpose extends beyond entertainment, embedding layered reflections on social and ethical realities that reaffirm its role as a site of intellectual and cultural engagement. Through its ability to articulate existential, ethical, and political concerns while sustaining narrative sophistication, Scandinavian crime fiction emerges as a distinctive intersection of literary artistry and critical inquiry, illuminating the fractures, anxieties, and aspirations of contemporary society on both local and global scales. Far from serving as mere popular fiction, Scandinavian crime narratives actively participate in the construction and negotiation of literary discourse, operating at the intersection of narrative form, ideology, and cultural critique. These texts do not simply mirror society but engage it critically, revealing the inseparability of literary form and ideological content. By integrating Bourdieuan, Foucauldian, Lyotardian, and Kristevan perspectives, the genre may be understood not only as a mode of storytelling but as a discursive arena in which questions of power, morality, identity, and social justice are interrogated. Its hybridization of aesthetic, ideological, and ethical concerns secures its status as a globally significant genre, capable of illuminating both the tensions within Nordic societies and the broader anxieties of modernity.

3. The *Oslo Trilogy* by Jo Nesbø as Literary Discourse

Jo Nesbø, one of the most prominent figures in contemporary Norwegian literature, occupies a central and influential position within the field of Scandinavian crime fiction. Although his international reputation is largely founded on the commercial success of the *Harry Hole* series, Nesbø's literary significance extends well beyond bestseller status or generic popularity. His novels consistently demonstrate that crime fiction can operate not merely as a vehicle for suspense and entertainment, but as a sophisticated medium of social critique, historical interrogation, and philosophical reflection. In this respect, Nesbø exemplifies the

evolution of Scandinavian crime fiction into a form of literary discourse capable of engaging critically with the complexities of late modern society.

Born in Oslo in 1960 and raised in Molde, Nesbø's trajectory toward authorship was notably unconventional. Prior to his literary career, he studied economics, worked as a stockbroker, and achieved national recognition as a musician. This diverse professional background arguably informs the thematic breadth and structural complexity of his fiction. His literary debut, *The Bat* (1997), introduced readers to the detective Harry Hole and immediately signaled Nesbø's distinctive approach to the crime fiction subgenre. From the outset, his writing combined narrative momentum with psychological depth and socio-political awareness, quickly positioning him as one of the principal architects of Scandinavian crime fiction. As Barry Forshaw observes, Nesbø's crime novels propelled him "to stratospheric heights – and have made him the most likely inheritor of the Larsson crown in Nordic crime fiction" (2012, p. 105).

At the core of Nesbø's literary project stands the character of Harry Hole, a detective whose internal conflicts, ethical ambiguities, and emotional fragility profoundly complicate conventional genre expectations. Rather than embodying the rational, detached investigator of classical detective fiction, Hole represents a deeply fractured subject. Mitzi M. Brunsdale situates him among protagonists "beset with demons within and without themselves, [...] having their hearts ripped out and subsid[ing] with grim Viking smiles upon their lips" (2016, p. 262). Similarly, Forshaw characterizes Harry as "a lone wolf, a chronic alcoholic separated from his wife and child" (2012, p. 106). Nina Muždeka further emphasizes that Harry "almost perfectly fits the bill" of the néo-polar antihero:

an obsessive yet vulnerable alcoholic and chain-smoker who does not have much experience of being happy. Both his professional and private life abound with demons he needs to confront, and both aspects of his life can be marked as dysfunctional – the first because of his tendency to defy authority and break the rules, the second because of his troubled relationship with Rakel. In Hole's life, with its intermittent episodes of drunken stupor, the only emotional constant is found in his relationship with his mentally challenged sister, Sis (2020, p. 223).

These depictions underscore Harry's dual status as both antihero and tragic figure, whose relentless pursuit of justice is inseparable from processes of self-destruction and moral compromise. Through the figure of Harry, Nesbø interrogates a wide range of existential, social, and political concerns, situating individual trauma within broader institutional and ideological frameworks of crime and justice. Although firmly anchored in the conventions of crime fiction, Nesbø's novels simultaneously function as cultural critique. Forshaw notes that they provide "a coolly objective guide to fluctuations in Norwegian society" (2012, p. 105), continuing "a long line of the Scandinavian crime fiction exposing the dark side of a seemingly ideal society" (qtd. in Brunsdale, 2016, p. 33). In novels such as *The Snowman* (2007) and *The Leopard* (2009), issues including domestic violence, the limitations of the welfare state, and the psychological consequences of vengeance are intricately woven into suspense-driven

narratives. Nesbø thus exemplifies how crime fiction can operate as discourse, engaging critically with modern social tensions while remaining accessible to an international readership.

This discursive potential is most clearly crystallized in the *Oslo Trilogy* – *The Redbreast*, *Nemesis*, and *The Devil's Star* – a sequence that marked a decisive turning point in Nesbø's career and significantly expanded the literary ambitions of Scandinavian crime fiction. *The Redbreast* is widely regarded as a defining novel within the *Harry Hole* series, distinguished by its intricate temporal structure and its engagement with Norway's wartime history. As Muždeka observes, the novel "tackles Norway's problematic involvement with the Nazis in the past, but also the awakening of national-socialist ideas in contemporary Norwegian society" (2022, p. 227). Brunsdale similarly notes that its narrative structure "ingeniously counterpointed Norwegian present-day neo-Nazi activities with painful echoes of the Nazi occupation that the Norwegian national consciousness apparently has not yet completely resolved" (2016, p. 333). In this novel, Harry functions as a mediator between past and present, embodying the unease of a nation whose official narrative of democratic progress masks unresolved historical fractures.

In *Nemesis*, the trilogy shifts its focus toward the psychological and ethical dimensions of revenge, deception, and guilt. The novel destabilizes generic expectations by positioning Harry simultaneously as investigator and suspect, thereby collapsing the traditional distinction between detective and criminal. Brunsdale remarks that the text "individualizes the role of revenge in today's society" (2016, p. 334), transforming vengeance into both a personal obsession and a systemic force. Harry's confrontation with distorted memories and fractured relationships, particularly those involving his partner Rakel, reveals the porous boundaries between justice and complicity, innocence and guilt. By embedding Harry within the very institutional structures he seeks to challenge, Nesbø foregrounds the instability of authority and the fragility of ethical judgment.

The Gothic dimension of the trilogy becomes most pronounced in *The Devil's Star*, where ritualistic murders marked by pentagram-shaped red diamonds intersect with institutional corruption. Harry's antagonist, the police officer Tom Waaler, embodies the infiltration of criminality into the very apparatus of law enforcement, dramatizing the extent of systemic decay. The climactic confrontation between Hole and Waaler stages not merely a personal reckoning but an allegorical struggle over the legitimacy of authority itself. The grotesque nature of the murders reinforces the theme of societal disintegration, while Harry's increasing isolation and alcoholism underscore the existential cost of resistance. The novel thus operates discursively by exposing both the vulnerability of the individual and the corruption of the collective structures ostensibly designed to preserve order.

The theoretical implications of the *Oslo Trilogy* can be productively illuminated through the lenses of Bourdieu, Foucault, Lyotard, and Kristeva. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the trilogy occupies a complex position within the literary field, straddling the boundary between mass-market appeal and symbolic capital. Its global success – manifest in translations into dozens of languages and millions of copies sold – clearly situates it within the commercial sphere. Yet its engagement with historical trauma, institutional critique, and philosophical inquiry allows it to circulate simultaneously as

“serious” literature. *The Redbreast*, in particular, exemplifies this duality: while formally structured as a thriller, its interrogation of Norway’s wartime complicity situates it within broader national debates on history and identity, thereby accruing cultural legitimacy.

From a Foucauldian standpoint, the trilogy dramatizes the mechanisms of power, discipline, and surveillance. The figure of Tom Waaler epitomizes institutional corruption, demonstrating how disciplinary power, ostensibly designed to uphold justice, can itself become complicit in criminality. Harry’s oscillation between obedience and defiance reveals the tension between individual autonomy and systemic authority. The police institution emerges not as a stable guarantor of justice, but as a contested site of power, exposing the fragility and vulnerability of the state’s disciplinary mechanisms.

Lyotard’s concept of incredulity toward meta-narratives resonates strongly with the trilogy’s refusal to provide definitive resolutions. In *The Redbreast*, the exposure of neo-Nazi resurgence fails to yield cathartic closure, instead emphasizing the persistence of unresolved historical trauma. In *Nemesis*, Harry’s compromised role as both detective and suspect destabilizes the expectation that truth and justice are attainable or coherent ends. These unresolved tensions exemplify a postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives of justice, morality, and historical reconciliation.

Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality further enriches the analysis of Nesbø’s work. Harry is intertextually linked to the American hardboiled detective tradition, echoing figures such as Chandler’s Marlowe, as well as to the existential antiheroes of European modernism. Brunsdale explicitly notes that Harry “has a tinge of American culture” (2016, p. 332), while his alcoholism, alienation, and tragic trajectory recall the existential figures of Camus or Dostoevsky. Moreover, the trilogy incorporates Gothic elements, ranging from the haunted wartime landscapes of *The Redbreast* to the grotesque, ritualized violence of *The Devil’s Star*. These intertextual threads situate Nesbø’s novels within a broader discursive network, transforming crime fiction into a hybrid genre that negotiates between popular storytelling and literary experimentation.

In this sense, *The Oslo Trilogy* should be read not merely as a sequence of crime novels, but as a coherent discursive formation mediating between history, ideology, and aesthetics. By intertwining historical reckoning, psychological depth, and institutional critique, Nesbø produces texts that interrogate the conditions of justice and identity in late modernity. Whether implicitly or through their interpretive potential, the trilogy’s engagement with Bourdieusian, Foucauldian, Lyotardian, and Kristevan perspectives underscores its position as a site where literature functions as discourse. Consequently, the *Oslo Trilogy* exemplifies how Scandinavian crime fiction operates at the intersection of narrative form, ideology, and cultural critique. It illuminates both local anxieties – Norway’s uneasy confrontation with its past and the fragility of its institutions – and universal concerns surrounding guilt, justice, and identity. Through Harry’s tragic trajectory, Nesbø ultimately affirms crime fiction as a legitimate and powerful participant in literary discourse: a hybrid form in which entertainment converges with philosophical and cultural reflection, exposing the fractures of Nordic societies and of modernity itself.

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